



How is language used in worship?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The use of language, especially, is always evolving. Language is an expression of culture that is shaped by many factors. Its use requires faithful reflection, humility, and discernment. Additional resources for further study are suggested at the end of this document.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Words have power. In the biblical story of the creation we read, “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light... God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.’ And it was so.” (Gen. 1: 3, 24).

In the New Testament, God in Christ is called the Word: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1).

Christian liturgical assemblies are gatherings in and around the Word of God, Jesus the Christ. As God in Christ is called the Word, the use of words (language) in Christian worship deserves careful attention.

Language both reflects and forms human attitudes and actions. As language shapes and influences human perceptions, the language used in worship shapes and influences our perceptions of God. Because language is created and used by humans, it reflects the imperfections and limitations of humanness. Therefore, no use of language can ever totally describe or represent God.

The Language of Scripture

All versions of scripture available for use in worship are translations from the original Hebrew and Greek. The original texts should be consulted before making significant alterations to contemporary translations. Some translations of scripture use non-inclusive language, even when the original Greek and Hebrew versions do not.

Many recent translations of scripture (for example, *New Revised Standard Version*) have incorporated the insights of the most up-to-date biblical scholarship to produce translations that are more accurate than past translations. They avoid the use of exclusive language not warranted by the original language texts. The revision to the Revised

Standard Version was completed in 1989 and an updated version, [NRSVue](#), is due to be available in 2022.

Even though the NRSV often avoids the use of exclusive language, some may seek readings in public worship that have been faithfully emended. *Sundays and Seasons* subscribers can access *Readings for the Assembly* in its online resource library (under lectionary and psalm resources). First published in 1995, this emendation of the NRSV has a primary goal of minimizing masculine language for God. These readings may be revised in the future and ELCA Worship would then indicate how to best access these for use in worship.

Language for Humanity

Language that excludes, alienates, demeans, stereotypes, or misrepresents persons by gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, age, ability, or other classifications should be avoided in worship.

The use of masculine terms to describe humankind should also be avoided. While in the past the practice of using the "generic masculine" assumed inclusion of all genders, this is no longer true. Generic use of terms such as *man*, *mankind*, *forefathers*, *brothers*, are readily replaced by *human*, *humanity*, *people*, *ancestors*, or *forebears*.

A dimension of language usage that has received recent attention is the use of binary descriptions such as *brothers and sisters* or *sons and daughters* when referring to humanity. While this language is certainly scriptural, options such as *siblings*, *siblings in Christ*, *beloved of God*, or *children of God* can name humanity without using a gender binary. At its 2019 Churchwide Assembly, the ELCA approved the social statement, [Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action](#). This statement notes that “this church focuses ... on God’s delight in the diversity of creation, as well as God’s intention of equality, unity, and relationality within that diversity. God says, ‘Let us make humanity in our own image.’ Just as there is relationality among the persons of the Trinity, there is relationality between the humans God creates and between God and humans. This reading of the Scriptures promotes an understanding of human diversity that is not limited by either a binary or a hierarchical view of gender.” (p. 18).

The use of pronouns is also important to consider. [Merriam-Webster](#) has expanded its definition of the word *they* to include its use as a pronoun for a singular person, especially useful for a person who identifies as non-binary. For example, in the Affirmation of Baptism (ELW p.236) the presider may wish to use each affirmer’s pronoun or name each time or may opt for the blessing on p. 236 that does not include binary language.

Language Describing God

Language used to describe God is just that—descriptive, not literal. Scripture provides us with rich and expansive images to describe God, including: eagle, (Deut. 32:11-12) baker, (Matt. 13:33) hen, (Matt. 23:27) wind, (Acts 2:2) bread, (John 6: 33-35) rock (Isa. 17:10) and light (John 8:12).

[Principles for Worship](#) notes how metaphors, especially those drawn from the stories and images of scripture, are central to our language in worship.

Because God is beyond the capacity of human speech to fully express, the Christian community frequently speaks about God in metaphor. Metaphor is multilayered, symbolic language that points beyond itself to a greater truth or reality. Metaphor is a deep well from which many can drink, a door open to communal meaning. (Background L-5B)

Faith, Sexism, and Justice affirms the widening of language used in describing God. “Although most Christian liturgy favors androcentric and Eurocentric language and imagery, expansive language and imagery are both scripturally rooted and theologically faithful. In their paradoxes and multiplicity, they communicate the mystery and intimacy of the triune God. Using inclusive and expansive scriptural and theological language and images therefore honors the Lutheran tradition. This church commends all Christians to retrieve and reform theological language, images, and themes so that they support faithful proclamations of God’s grace in Jesus Christ to all persons.” (p. 46). For a helpful guide to scriptural images for God, see *All Creation Sings* (p. 268-271).

Language Addressing God

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus addressed God as *Abba*, "father." This address does not ascribe a male gender to God but is an intimate address that is suggestive of the loving and trusting relationship between parent and child. Jesus’ address to God the Father also defied the person who said he was God and that he was the father of the empire—the Roman emperor.

The image of father used by Jesus draws upon the deepest and most human of all relationships—that of parent to child. God traditionally has been called "father" in worship to convey the intimate relationship between God and the church. The metaphorical use of the term "father" continues to be used in worship, alongside many other biblical metaphors for God. However, because sin can distort even the fundamental relationships of parents to children, the image of a father may be difficult to comprehend for some who have experienced alienation in their relationship to a human father. In addition to language of God’s relationship to us as Father, other metaphors expressing this relationship include “mother” or “parent.”

Titles that suggest the activity of God may be used to address and describe God. Such titles include Advocate, Healer, Savior, and Refuge. Many biblical titles for God are also available; They include Adonai, Source of Life, Root of Jesse, and Alpha and Omega.

Similes may be used to address God. For example, "God who cares for us as a mother hen cares for her chicks" or "God, who watches over us as a sentinel standing watch by night...."

Second-person pronouns (you), instead of gender specific and third person pronouns, may be used to address God. With the use of the pronoun “they” as a singular pronoun (see above), this is also being explored in God-language.

Language Referring to Jesus

Jesus came to earth as a male human being, therefore the pronoun "he" is used appropriately when referring to Jesus. However, the humanness of Jesus has always been viewed as more significant than his male gender. The Christological categories used by

the church (human and divine natures, humanity and divinity) clearly show that the central doctrines of the faith are based upon Jesus' humanness, not his maleness. Although the use of male pronouns is appropriate when referring to Jesus, care should be taken to find other ways to speak of Jesus that emphasize humanness rather than maleness. It can be helpful to construct sentences utilizing "Jesus" more often than "he/him."

Language Addressing Jesus

The Scriptures provide many forms of address for Jesus. A significant confessional address is "Jesus is Lord." However, other forms of address using non-masculine imagery provide helpful balance to masculine. In addition, we now understand "sex" and "gender" as different ways to talk about identity. One can have feminine qualities and be of the male sex. [*Faith, Sexism, and Justice*](#) notes ancient descriptions of Jesus using biblical feminine imagery. "Anselm of Canterbury wrote, 'But you, Jesus ... Are you not that mother who, like a hen collects her chickens under her wing? Truly master, you are a mother.' Julian of Norwich wrote, 'A mother can hold her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender mother, Jesus, can lead us in friendly fashion into his blessed breast by means of his sweet open side.'" (p. 45).

Other forms of addressing Jesus include using Christ, Teacher, Emmanuel, Savior, Redeemer, and Word.

Language referring to the Spirit

The Scriptures use both the Greek non-binary word *pneuma* and the Hebrew feminine word *ruach* to describe the Spirit. Throughout the history of the church, feminine pronouns have often been employed in reference to the Spirit. Some see this usage as balancing the masculine Father and Son references; others find it an uneven use of gender to understand the Trinity. Just as masculine terms are used metaphorically, so are feminine. The use of feminine pronouns does not assign human female sexual being to God's Spirit, which is beyond human gender. Care in using diverse terms for the Spirit is thus also called for. In the same way that God is not always referred to in masculine pronouns, the Spirit is not always referred to in the feminine.

The Language of Assembly Song

Some hymns that were written before people became sensitive to the use of inclusive language can be modified to reflect more inclusive terms, but others cannot. Issues of copyright, meter, rhyme, tradition, and poetic integrity of the text are all factors in these decisions. Each hymn needs to be evaluated to determine whether alteration is feasible or desirable. In some cases, new stanzas reflecting current language sensitivity can be added to old hymns. In other cases, particularly problematic stanzas can be omitted. In yet other instances, the traditional weight of certain hymns may necessitate their being kept intact and balanced by other hymns that are more inclusive in language.

Newly composed songs are not exempt from this issue, as many still use exclusive language for God and humankind. Many songs come from theological traditions that do not value inclusive language as a priority or concern. Such songs may not be the best

means of proclaiming the gospel in a Lutheran setting. For more, see *Sound Decisions* available for download in resources.

The Trinitarian Baptismal Formula

According to the ecumenically received baptismal formula, Holy Baptism is administered using water and the name of the Triune God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In [The Use of the Means of Grace](#) (Principle 24), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America upholds this name as the name in which this church baptizes.

The ecumenical church is presently engaged in discussions seeking to expand and enrich language used to address the triune God. It is helpful to keep in mind that language use has emerged over the centuries, and we approach its use with humility and care, faithfully stewarding imagery found in the scriptures. Discussions about language may eventually produce additional formulations. Until then, the current baptismal formula continues to be the only one recognized in the ELCA. At the same time, “other texts within the baptismal liturgy, such as prayers and hymns, may expand our language for the triune God.” (Principles for Worship, Application L-8D)

Language and Justice

Words are powerful not only because of how they express our praise, prayer, and proclamation in worship; the words we use also form our faith. As *Principles for Worship* states, “The language of worship embodies God’s mercy and justice, forming us to live as merciful and just people.” And “Language used in worship has power to form and shape believers, sending us from the assembly to live as merciful and just people who serve the mission of God in this world.” (Principle L-4, Application L-4C)

The response of this church desired in the recent ELCA Social Statement to use inclusive and expansive language for God and humanity is rooted in this understanding of the power of language to form us in relationship with God and one another. For more, see the related [FAQ: What is meant by inclusive and expansive language in worship?](#) and resources listed below.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↳ What is meant by inclusive and expansive language in worship?
- ↳ Can we alter the language of hymns and songs?
- ↳ How can lay people participate in worship leadership?
- ↳ How do we lead liturgy with grace and confidence?

Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:

- 📄 *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#))

- 📖 *Principles for Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#). See especially, “Language in the Christian Assembly, pp. 2-22).
- 📖 Collins, Dori Erwin and Scott C. Weidler. [*Sound Decisions: Evaluating Contemporary Music for Lutheran Worship*](#). Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Division for Congregational Ministries.
- 📖 Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action, 2019. (Available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#) and a [User’s Guide](#) is also available.)

Resources Available from [1517 Media](#) / [Augsburg Fortress](#):

- 📖 “Scriptural Images for God” in *All Creation Sings*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2020, pp. 268-271.
- 📖 “Scripture and Worship” in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006, pp. 1154-1159.
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds., *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship* Augsburg Fortress, 2012. (Leader edition and Participant edition also available separately).
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne; Julie O'Brien; Melinda Quivik and Martin Seltz, eds., *Leading Worship Matters: A Sourcebook for Preparing Worship Leaders*. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.
- 📖 *In These or Similar Words: Crafting Language for Worship*. Augsburg Fortress, 2015.
- 📖 Hoyer, Christopher George. *Getting the Word Out: A Handbook for Readers*. Minneapolis. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.
- 📖 Scharen, Christian. *Serving the Assembly’s Worship: A Handbook for Assisting Ministers*. Minneapolis. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.
- 📖 Streufert, Mary. *Language for God: A Lutheran Perspective*. Fortress Press, 2022. Forthcoming.

Other Resources

- 📖 [Reconciling Works: Lutherans for Full Participation](#)

Copyright © 2021 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

This document may be reproduced for use in your congregation as long as the copyright notice appears on each copy.